

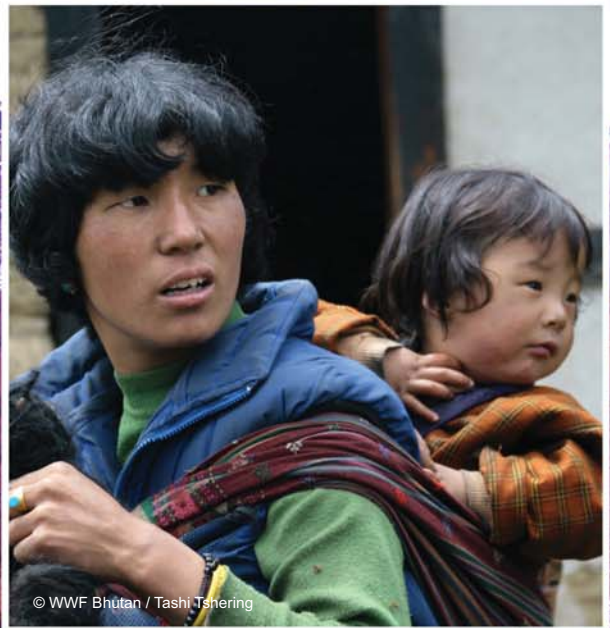


WWF

FACT SHEET

LIVING
HIMALAYAS

Sacred Land, Sacred People



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Just as the Eastern Himalayas are known for its rich biodiversity and wildlife, they are equally celebrated for its diverse people and their cultures. With more than 40 languages spoken here, the region is home to a mosaic of cultures and faiths – Buddhists, Hindus, Christians and animists – all of whom have lived closely with nature for centuries. Many of these communities live in isolation, and as a result, their custom, lifestyle and livelihoods have been shaped by their environment.

Local communities and indigenous peoples are among the Earth's most important stewards of biodiversity and natural places. In the Eastern Himalayas, WWF is committed to supporting communities and working with them in partnership to conserve and sustainably use their natural resources. This includes involving them in the management of natural resources, ensuring they share in the benefits arising from Protected Areas, and helping to

improve livelihoods and alleviate poverty.

A SACRED LANDSCAPE UNDER THREAT

In the high-altitude regions of Nepal one finds the Sherpa, Rai, Limbu, Tamang, Jirel, Thakali, Magar and Gurung communities, who generally live in the highest mountain areas beyond which there is no possibility of human settlement. Hindus of Indian heritage are dominant in the sub-Himalayas and the middle-Himalayan valleys in Nepal, while Ngaloops, Sharchops and Lhotsampas are some of the ethnic groups living in Bhutan. To the north, Tibetan Buddhists inhabit the Great Himalayas from Ladakh to northeast India; the Eastern Himalayas of India and nearby areas of eastern Bhutan are home to animists.

While there are many different ethnic groups and tribes living throughout the Eastern Himalayas, they have at least one thing in common: their way of life is being

threatened by changes to their environment.

Despite its apparent remoteness and inaccessibility, the region has not been spared from biodiversity loss. Today, remaining natural habitats are getting patchy, with increasing population pressures leading to clearing of forests and grasslands. The mountain region is also prone to natural disasters, and climate change and poor land management are leading to increasing landslides, forest fires and flash floods. As the risks to this sacred landscape increase so too does the future of the people and wildlife that live there.

COMMUNITY CONSERVATION

WWF is engaged in an ambitious conservation effort to create a Himalayan landscape where the biological and cultural treasures of the world's highest sacred mountains and deepest valleys are safeguarded, while local people's rights over resources are ensured and their



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livelihoods enhanced and sustained.

WWF is working in Bhutan, India and Nepal, to preserve natural sites of cultural and religious importance by recognizing the traditional customs of multiethnic groups and encouraging local communities to manage their natural resources. WWF is also engaging with religious leaders and faith communities throughout the Eastern Himalayas to protect and enhance environmental and spiritual values of the region's sacred natural sites, which are important to not only local people but also a huge international faith-based community.

Conserving natural areas with sacred significance not only ensures their preservation for the future, but also protects a way of life for the very people who rely on nature for their survival.

SUCCESSES IN A SACRED LAND

In an historic event in 2006, the Government of Nepal handed over the Kangchenjunga Conservation Area in the northeast corner of Nepal to local communities to ensure the sustainable management of this pristine environment. This 2,035 km² area – home to the world's third highest mountain, Mt Kangchenjunga (8,586m) – is known for its alpine meadows, high-altitude wetlands and glaciers as well as its rich biodiversity, which includes red pandas and snow leopards. WWF was instrumental in the creation of the Kangchenjunga Conservation Area and continues to work with local communities to promote the sustainable management of forest resources.

WWF has also worked together with local institutions to commission micro-hydro power plants and distribute solar panels to encourage people to use alternative energy and, thus, reduce pressure on the surrounding forests. The introduction of WWF-supported biogas projects in the Terai Arc Landscape in Nepal is also seen as having the potential to restore degraded

forests in critical areas through reducing pressure on the forests for fuel wood as well as brining carbon fund to benefit both biodiversity and local people.

Other conservation partnerships include working with Buddhist Gurus and followers, on mountain spring restoration and high-altitude wetland projects across the Eastern Himalayas. Bhutan's Jigme Dorji National Park is also home to a number of sacred peaks – Jomolhari, Tsheringang and Jichu Drakey – that are a focus for conservation. WWF is also working on conserving sacred areas outside Protected Areas to ensure habitat and community connectivity.

"If successful, our work will achieve true harmony in the Himalayas – a balance between culture and nature that provides plentiful resources for people while giving wildlife space to thrive."

– WWF Living Himalayas Strategic Plan

In the Indian Himalayas, high-altitude wetlands are revered by local communities as sacred, and as such, they are often the sites of religious festivals. This strong nature-culture bond plays a key role in conserving habitats. Several Conservation Areas managed by communities have sprung up in north east India. The sacred groves in Sikkim and in western Arunachal Pradesh are also being protected by Buddhist monasteries, and despite strong demand on natural resources, still represent healthy stands of forests.

By developing a deeper understanding of traditional belief systems and integrating these with modern conservation practices,

WWF hopes to ensure effective conservation of biodiversity and cultural diversity in this sacred Himalayan landscape.



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